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ABSTRACT

To provide both an enriching theatre experience for students and faculty and new opportunities for women artists, the Department of Theatre Arts and Speech at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey at Newark held a competition for new plays by New Jersey women playwrights. The winning play, Leni Hamilton's "The Fortress," a story of Benedict Arnold's love affair with Peggy Shippen, was cast with professional, faculty, and student actors and directed by Susan Lehman of the Women's Project of the American Place Theatre. Despite problems in financing the production and some tensions, frustrations and disagreement, the project was generally a success. It provided a valuable educational experience for both theatre majors and students who participated in or viewed the play as part of their liberal arts education, offered a new playwright the rare opportunity of staging her work, and presented a week of performances of professional calibre. (MM)

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PROFESSIONALS ON CAMPUS: BRIDGING THE GAP
WITH "THE FORTRESS" AND A GRANT

by

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INTRODUCTION

Several ideas came together in the summer of 1979 which generated a project to do three things in the Department of Theatre Arts and Speech at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in Newark. One, although guests from the commercial theatre had occasionally visited the campus from time to time there had been little opportunity for students majoring in the department to work with professional performers or directors from outside the department. I thought if money could be found to invite an artist-in-residence it would be welcomed as an enriching experience for students and faculty alike. Two, there was growing awareness of the few opportunities for women in the arts, especially as directors and playwrights. If a woman director or playwright could be invited as a guest artist it would be a refreshing change since the theatre faculty ^{were} ~~were~~ all male. Three, since producing original plays commercially is very expensive in New York City, our theatre, only fifteen miles from Manhattan, might provide space, time, and support personnel in a new venture. It seemed an ideal situation for a playwright to work out staging and production problems without great risk or fear of financial failure. Student participation, academically, or as performers and as technical assistants would experience firsthand the evolution of a production from the playwright's work through the rehearsal process to a public performance.

By chance, while co-chairing the hospitality committee for the August 1979 American Theatre Association convention, I met the director of the Women's Project of the American Place Theatre, Susan Lehman who introduced herself. Our conversation included talk about women directors and playwrights and the need for opportunities. She asked if we had ever invited a woman director on campus to guest direct a play. We had not. The conversation reinforced the idea that something should be done about it.

On campus the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences encouraged faculty to apply for grants. Money was tight and grant money was needed to fill in the gaps. Before the end of the year I had secured the help of Anthony D. Lutkus, Assistant Dean, to write a grant proposal to be submitted to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. What follows is an abbreviated account of what happened in the two-year effort to implement the project.

THE GRANT

The original plan was to ask for an amount sufficient for a three-year continuation. Because the proposal was directed to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts the narration describing the project focussed on finding New Jersey women playwrights. It was defined as a competition for new plays, the winner to be selected for the staging of the original play. Of course, in asking for funds, the proposal included matching costs covered by the

University.

All grants made to individual organizations from the Council on the Arts are subject to a list of general conditions and requirements. They are limited to a specified time, funds must be expended solely for the activities described in the approved application unless there is a modified and agreed upon specification. Publicity guidelines must be followed and the Council must be recognized as specified in all programs, catalogs, or releases. Reports were to be made so that the State Arts Agency could include accurate information to the National Council on the Arts. Financial management systems were to record accurate, current and complete disclosure of the financial results of the program. Also, compliance with laws regarding minimum wages, safety, and sanitary laws were to be assured in addition to conforming to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 regarding nondiscrimination.

Ten copies of the application forms and the budget were submitted in time to meet the December deadline. There would be no decision before June 30, 1980.

THE BUDGET

The original budget called for approximately \$32,000 each year (an average figure) with the University providing about two-thirds of the amount in matching funds. The matching funds included salaries and wages calculated as a percent of the time required from the Project Director, Co-Director, Technical Director, Publicity Chairman,

and work-study aides. Indirect costs would be figured by a fixed formula with a percent of the Director's salary; and an additional amount figured for utilities. The asking amount for the first year was about \$13,000 which included supplies and materials, an actor-in-residence, a playwright, a stage director, coadjutant release time for the project director, and fringe benefits for the above. An artist's fee for a costume designer was requested as well as money for transportation.

THE PLAN

Feeling good about the application and optimistic about its acceptance, a search was begun to find an original play written by a New Jersey woman playwright. With the help of the American Place Theatre, eleven playwrights were found and scripts were solicited. Susan Lehman agreed to direct providing her schedule would permit. One script in particular, "The Fortress" by Leni Hamilton was singled out. It seemed appropriate, suited to our circumstances. It was a play about Benedict Arnold and his tempestuous love affair with a young Philadelphia socialite, Peggy Shippen, who became his wife. The incidents in the drama revolved around the moment General Arnold decided to "sell out" West Point and join the British side confident that they would win the Revolutionary War. It was a story about "betrayal," and what effect it had on those involved. The playwright had researched the material well and had come up with an unusual story with human interest about

this traitor few people really remember much about. It provided a curious look into a bit of American history.

When contacted about her play Hamilton responded eagerly. She was very interested in the possibility of having "The Fortress" staged.

In April, 1980, I asked the director and the playwright to meet with Dean Lutkus, who had helped write the grant, and me. No contracts were official yet. Lehman, experienced in staging original plays in a number of Off Broadway theatres and a member of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, liked the play and saw promise in it. Hamilton, a Yale MFA graduate, began immediately to speculate about matters of casting and publicity. Everyone thought the title roles required maturity. Certainly Benedict Arnold could not be played by an undergraduate student. We would have to locate a male actor in his forties able to meet this challenge.

In a chance meeting with Eileen Lawton, Chairperson of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, I asked what she thought chances were of receiving the grant. She explained the immense task of giving each proposal consideration and said that a small board of reviewers was busy reading more than 800 applications. I ignored a "sinking" feeling and continued to think positively.

There was no reply by the end of June. A telephone call to Trenton in July resulted in information that the board of reviewers

was still busy so there would be no word until the fifteenth of the month. August arrived and there was no reply. Another call to Trenton. Bad news. The proposal would not be funded and I would be notified by letter later.

When I broke the news to Dean Lutkus he asked if I were relieved (because of the time involved and the responsibility) or would I still be interested if he could find a way to get assistance internally. I wanted to continue. We both made appointments with the Associate Dean and told him what had transpired, that the theatre season had already been advertised with the final production designated as a "premiere of an original play by a New Jersey woman playwright." He listened sympathetically and offered coadjutant non-teaching funds to bring the director and the playwright on campus for a semester if they could integrate their work as an adjunct experience for the theatre major.

In September of 1980 the director and the playwright wanted written offers because their own commitments were becoming more complex. The Dean complied with an official offer to both. The sums of money were not great enticement but Lehman and Hamilton were eager about the project. They accepted. Ironically, shortly after, the Rutgers Contracts Office called and said that the New Jersey State Council on the Arts in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Arts had allocated \$3500 to the University for our project! A new budget would be required for dispersal of the funds.

AUDITIONS AND CASTING

I contacted the University Resident Theatre Association in New York to find out how much it would cost to hire an artist-in-residence to perform. The grant limited the number of Equity performers to one only on a weekly basis unless the time of employment could be extended to five weeks or more (it could not). The money would cover three weeks of rehearsal and seven performances.

Joe Hart, then Chairman of the Rutgers Theatre Department in New Brunswick, was a Revolutionary War buff. He agreed to audition for the role of Arnold. Lehman brought her friend Francesca James, Emmy Award winner for her role in All My Children, the daytime television series, to audition as Peggy Shippen. The audition went well. However, Hart's administrative responsibilities were heavy. He was also developing a children's theatre which occupied his time several nights a week. Miss James also had other commitments and could not afford the time. This was in September, so we decided to hold auditions for the roles of General Arnold, Peggy, and Major Andre again in December with notices in newspapers and on radio and television.

November was a month for preliminary planning of technical requirements. Props and costumes were to be emphasized. I located a freelance costumier who agreed to help design the department's season.

Rutgers Public Information Office sent out audition notices

to seventy-five newspapers and at least eight or nine radio and television stations. Some of our better student talent auditioned but there was little response from the community. We began to realize that in addition to the three major roles, George Washington would be difficult to cast. These roles all needed mature adults. The idea of a showcase was contemplated but Actors' Equity would not agree. The representative thought it was in the best interests of professional actors and actresses not to showcase on college campuses. Complexities in mixing professionals and amateurs emerged.

Playwright Hamilton preferred the security of professionals at least in the lead roles. She offered to pay for an ad in Backstage. New audition dates were set for the middle of February. We were not sure professionals would make the trip from Manhattan to Newark. When the time came about twelve performers appeared. Two actresses suited for the Peggy Shippen role did well in the auditions but there was no one resembling a Benedict Arnold, Washington, or Andre, the British Major.

It was then that Lehman thought we should move auditions to New York City. A March date was set, an audition room on the upper Westside was rented and two hours were allotted. Another ad was placed in Backstage. This time, the ad called for not only Arnold but also his two aides, Colonel Varick and Colonel Franks as well. Because of the difficulty of mixing students and professionals it

was now decided that students were to be involved as much as possible but if they were not the right age for the role non-Equity professionals would be selected to properly balance the cast. Auditions for students on campus clearly demonstrated that they were too young for many of the roles. Nevertheless, a student cast would be selected at least for rehearsal experience with a professional director until the professional actors could arrive.

Auditions in New York City resulted in performers with the appropriate ages. The hall was lined with auditioners waiting to try out. The two aides, Varick and Franks were tentatively cast as was Joshua Smith, the obnoxious double agent, a man in his thirties, but time ran out on the rented space. Lehman agreed to make another appointment with those who were still waiting in line. Another date was set for additional auditions at a rehearsal hall in the American Place Theatre where the director had worked previously. American Place donated the space for the additional time needed. After hearing seven or eight people it was decided that John Capodice should be the Equity performer to play General Benedict Arnold, and Jean Hackett, a non-Equity actress, should play Peggy Shippen. Anthony Moore, a non-Equity actor with a British accent, was cast in the role of Major John Andre. After debating about what to do about George Washington (cut him out of the play or find someone the appropriate age and stature) the director felt that with a wig I would resemble the General and since I had been substituting for Benedict Arnold in auditions she was confident of my ability to perform the role. I consented.

Colonel Lamb, the oldest of the military officers, was still a problem. If he were to be a man in his fifties, he, too, would have to be a non-Equity professional. Hamilton made twenty-five telephone calls to a network of acquaintances in order to find the right man. Stan Schwartz was a parttime actor who had been making the rounds in resident and semi-professional theatres. When contacted he expressed interest and was cast after a reading.

Students were chosen to fill in the remaining six roles which did not have specific age requirements. We finally had a cast of students, faculty, non-Equity professionals and an Equity artist-in-residence from the University Resident Theatre Association.

REHEARSALS

The director scheduled rehearsal hours between three in the afternoon and ten at night. This schedule included three full weeks in addition to a preceding week devoted exclusively to the students. The rehearsal time was more intense than that to which the students were accustomed. Some adapted well. Others were skeptical and defensive about the long hours. Some were doubling in technical work to fulfill course responsibilities. Off campus jobs and studies were additional pressures.

The professional performers accepted the working methods of the director who liked to begin with a meditative group exercise and then work extensively with the cast "in the chairs." That is, she

was not anxious to get to blocking the action until motivations and "spines" were understood. This was difficult for students who wanted to get up and start "acting." Understanding the space came second. They found it difficult to separate and postpone stage movement. Part of the difficulty stemmed from not understanding the need for ensemble relationships. Group meditation exercises were unfamiliar to them and although they were not required to participate they were quietly critical of the purpose.

The professionals commuted from Manhattan and Queens. Non-Equity performers were reimbursed for travel and the artist-in-residence was paid a weekly salary. Although the professionals and the students got along well together there was a faction of staff and students who felt their space had been invaded. Technical faculty and staff were accustomed to having total control over working hours and crews. The new configuration of time was upsetting. So many outsiders created a social pressure not altogether accepted.

Working with a new play was also disconcerting to some. After rehearsal the director and playwright would discuss ways to improve scenes. Frequently the playwright came back the next day with a rewrite of a scene. Student actors normally learn lines once. To be required to change lines or relearn a scene was a jarring challenge.

Two students were permitted to register in an individual study course and get credit for being associated with the production. One studied the relationship between the playwright and director and was

particularly cognizant of the rewrites after having scenes rehearsed and discussed by the playwright, director, and actors. Another decided to emphasize costuming. Since this was a period play she learned procedures for research, design, and construction of costumes for a Revolutionary War drama.

COSTUMES

Martha Halley, who worked with Theatre Development's Costume Collection in New York, agreed to design and outfit the show. Since she had access to Costume Collection facilities most of the work was done in Manhattan. Cast members made appointments for fittings at the Costume Collection warehouse. Arnold, Varick, Franks, Lamb, Washington, and Peggy Shippen all required wigs. These were fitted and prepared by Charles Lopresto, a specialist in wigs for professional shows.

PERFORMANCES

Seven performances were given April 23,24,25 and April 29 including a matinee and an evening performance, April 30 and May 1, 1981. After the matinee performance a symposium was held on "Women in the Arts." It was open to the public and conducted by the playwright, director, and two faculty members, Virginia Tiger and Marianna daVinci Nichols, both specialists on women in literature and the arts. This symposium was also offered as a forum for the

College Honors Program. Students in this program attended the play, the symposium, and wrote a report on their experience.

CONCLUSIONS

This was the first time an original full-length play by a New Jersey playwright was produced at the University Theatre in Newark. Because "The Fortress" was an intriguing drama set in 1778-1780 when West Point was turned over to the British and General Arnold was revealed to be the first traitor in this country it was a good project of interest to students of American history as well as theatre.

It was excellently directed and well cast with one artist-in-residence, several non-Equity professionals together with faculty and students from the University campus. The educational experience for students was extremely valuable for those seeking careers in theatre as well as for students who participated or viewed the play as part of their liberal arts education. The symposium, too, was well attended and proved to be a stimulating exchange of ideas.

The project in total was successful in the sense that the goal of producing an original play by a New Jersey playwright was achieved with professional results without the pressures for commercial success. The playwright was able to revise and improve the script as it was being staged. The project was not without frustrations, tensions among cast and crews, disagreements, extreme financial constraints, and disappointments, but it was a maturing experience, exciting, challenging, and in the end worthwhile.